

MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT

by Julia Lesage

The word "subdesarrollo" or underdevelopment plagues everyone who lives in South America. It may mean a colonized economy or insufficient industrial development, or it just may come to mean that foreign is better. The Cuban film **MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT** directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, deals with this topic of underdevelopment in a number of ways. Primarily the film concerns itself with the life and thoughts of a bourgeois intellectual, Sergio, who has literally stayed behind the revolution. He stays in Cuba when his wife and parents go to the United States because he wants to observe what is going to continue to happen in Cuba. He thinks of himself as Europeanized; to him, underdevelopment means that the Cuban mind is underdeveloped. Sergio criticizes people, especially women, for forgetting and not being consistent, but in his own case, remembering everything just paralyzes him.

The original novel from which the film was made, published in English as **INCONSOLABLE MEMORIES**, was written by Edmundo Desnoës, a Cuban intellectual who spent many years in the United States, which influenced his writing, returned to Cuba after the revolution to an active position in the publishing house Casa de las Americas, and then went back to the United States to live his later years in New York City. Desnoës seems to have put a lot of himself into **INCONSOLABLE MEMORIES'** first person narrator, giving that protagonist many insights and sympathetic qualities. But in the novel, he also puts this alter ego up to criticism. Within the formal structure of an autobiography, an unnamed protagonist is writing a diary to maintain his sanity and personal identity, to gain a kind of control over his own life. He also writes a first-person narration of lived experience since he feels himself to be a frustrated author who cannot create. In a circular fashion he sees the world as so complex that he has nothing to say. In Alea's film this intellectual, named Sergio, stands as a "memory of underdevelopment," a bourgeois who immerses himself in his own mental acuity but who cannot break out of angst to enter into commitment.

Both novel and the film are complex. In the novel the protagonist criticizes his friend Eddy (Desnoës) for writing a story with flat characterization about an alienated intellectual who is saved by committing himself to the revolution. That reference indicates the vigor and with which Cuban artists and intellectuals have long battled socialist realism, and this film stands as one of the best indications of Cuban artists' independence and efforts to create whole new forms for political art. Significantly, **MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT** is thoroughly urban; neither author Desnoës nor director Alea have unearth native or folkloric strains to write about, although this path is an esteemed one for Cuban artists. (An example of the native type of literature is the poetry of Nicholas Guillen, who captures afro-cuban rhythms in his poetry, or the novels of Alejo Carpentier, who celebrates a "primal" Cuba in such works as **THE LOST STEPS**.) The novel and the film look directly at European and American cultural influences and are not afraid to use mainstream Western contemporary modes of expression--in both novel and film--even while criticizing European and U.S. influences on Cuban life.

The film **MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT** contains two stories, one explicit and one implicit, which Alea uses to comment on each other. In the background the film presents the story of Cuban society, which moves with the force of the revolution and history. The fact that political history provides the film's framework is established by three principle documentary sequences. First, the film's opening sequence shows a public dance at which a political leader is assassinated. Later, a central documentary sequence, seemingly unrelated to the narrative, depicts and analyzes moments from the trial of the counterrevolutionary officers captured at Playa Giron. And a final series of sequences on the missile crisis combine both documentary shots and narrative material to conclude the film.

In terms of film style, Alea is commenting in two ways on the topic of underdevelopment. He develops a psychological narrative in the style of European films about Sergio's existential alienation. At the same time he holds that alienation up to criticism by means of documentary footage which shows us the revolution which Sergio will not join. For example, in a complex way, the film mixes cinematic styles and modes of spoken discourse, moving back and forth in time, frequently according to Sergio's memories. The shots of the Cuban people on the street during the film and particularly at the dance at the beginning of the film establish a sense of race, against which background we can see that Sergio, a tall fair man who looks like a gringo, is deliberately shown as very white -- something a Latin audience would pick up on since skin color is often an index of class. In the middle of the film Alea repeats the opening sequence of dark-skinned Cubans dancing and the sudden shooting of one of the men there, but this time we see Sergio among the crowd, and his whiteness stands out. It seems that Alea uses such a fair protagonist to emphasize in visual terms this middle class intellectual's alienation from the people.

Alea, the director of the film, commented himself on the transformation from novel to film. In the film as in the novel, Sergio's "perceptions of reality, sometimes deformed, and always subjective," also become the object of our critical attitude:

"... The confrontation between his world with the 'documentary' world that we show (*our* subjective world) can have some rich overtones... We developed more than what was included in the novel, that line which shows 'objective' reality that surrounds the character and that little by little closes in on him and suffocates him at the end. That line alternates with the protagonist's own and is basically built with documents, that is, with current testimonies."

The documentary elements in the narrative sections of the film also generally work very well, as in the depiction of a round table discussion which Sergio attends. The forum's topic is Literature and Underdevelopment, and the panelists include the real Edmundo Desnoës and Jack Gelber, the North American playwright who wrote the introduction to the English translation of **INCONSOLABLE MEMORIES**. In this filmed panel Desnoës speaks about his long stay in the United States, where he says he was just another "spic," and he especially criticizes the U.S. "great white dream." Another speaker says that underdevelopment and development are sick words, a linguistic and ideological alibi, and that Cuba needs instead the words capitalism and socialism. Jack Gelber then

demands humorously, "Why use an impotent form like a round table discussion after the revolution?" But the fact that he uses English to assert this just protest against academic bullshit in English reveals cultural imperialism one more time.

In political terms I see one major problem in the effect some of the details in the film are supposed to have on a Cuban audience. Alea shows Sergio living untroubled and alone in luxury, well after the revolution, in an apartment that could have housed a family or two. The audience is supposed to criticize and not envy this way of life. In particular, the kitchen and plumbing are shown in splendid working order, as is Sergio's tape recorder, in spite of the fact that imported fixtures have long since stopped coming in. The film itself raises the point that automobile parts and motor oil are scarce. For many Cubans, when Havana's big department store El Encanto burned down, that signaled the end of imported luxuries. Buildings have deteriorated in Havana since the government has emphasized rural development, but Alea shows Sergio's Havana apartment as being kept up perfectly.

In one sequence in the film, block captains come to inventory the apartment. During this time we learn that Sergio's income comes from monthly state payments for a building of his which had been confiscated, payments he will receive for another thirteen years. All of these details in the film paint a picture of Cuba as being fair to those bourgeois who have stayed, letting them, like Sergio, just fade away of their own accord and not stripping comforts from them. Yet what "message" does this apartment in the movie have for a Cuban audience? It seems to say, "You are superior for you are working for the revolution, while a character such as Sergio has all these fine possessions but is empty inside." But maybe the audience looks on that nice plumbing with envy or thinks it should go to someone more deserving. Specifically, the film does not analyze the relation between Sergio's living in material comfort and the theme of underdevelopment as a whole.

SERGIO AND SEXUAL POLITICS

The character Sergio, acted in Mastroianni style by Sergio Corrieri, elicits a certain sympathy. Yet the film presents this character in a static emotional and social state. If the audience approves of the direction the Cuban revolutionary "background" is going, Sergio's paralysis stands as a critique of those who cannot join the revolution.

Sergio prides himself on his urbanity, on his being Europeanized. He is both obsessed with and condescending about Cuba and the Cubans' underdevelopment. In particular, he thinks of Cuban women as intellectually and culturally underdeveloped, although he uses sex to escape from his alienation from Cuban society and his paralysis as a writer. In the course of the film we see Sergio's egotism in his sexual relations. He has an affair with a young woman, Elena, whom he picks up on the street and whom he tries to educate by taking to bookstores and museums. At one point he reflects, "I discovered Elena didn't think as much as I did. I try to live as a European and she makes me feel the underdevelopment at every step."

Sergio has an acute intellect. He sees much that is true about Cuba and especially is very aware about himself. To criticize Sergio as bourgeois is easy. Yet he himself rejects most of the Cubans of his class, his wife Laura and his friend Pablo especially, as superficial, greedy, and self-deceiving. But he will also not use his intellect to serve the revolution. The film shows that Sergio's refusal to join with others to build a new Cuban society depends both on his class position and on his temperament. The film depicts the cost to him personally of staying apart as an observer. Sergio is not one who flees to the United States, and his reasons for staying in Cuba go beyond the fact that his marriage has gone stale. As he says, he has a great curiosity to see what will happen in Cuba next. A key prop in the film is a high powered telescope installed on the porch of his apartment. Early in the film Sergio looks through it at a couple making love. At the end of the film he looks down on the mobilization for the missile crisis, in which the whole of Havana is unified in the face of impending destruction. Looking through the telescope means more than idle curiosity. It also symbolizes passivity and internalized hopelessness. At the end of the film, Sergio looking through the telescope is a Sergio trapped in his own introspection.

The film details the relation between the personal and the political, which comes out in the critique of Sergio as a male. In the film Sergio's attitude toward women, his machismo, is clearly related to an outmoded pre-revolutionary (or anti-revolutionary) way of life. Sergio tries to mold women to fit his idea of what they should be. The women in the film include Naomi, the Protestant maid, about whose baptism Sergio has erotic fantasies; Laura, the wife, older than he, accustomed to a material standard of luxury with him, yet presumably eager to make new emotional and material ties in the United States; Elena, the young Cuban woman looking for adventure yet ultimately trapped inside an oppressive family situation; and Hanna, the German girl Sergio courted away from high school and whose expectations for him to develop intellectually he could not live up to. Each one of the woman characters reveals something different about Sergio, and each one also offers an opportunity to elaborate on what Sergio means by "underdevelopment" and what we the viewers are to think about that concept as well.

The woman he says he really loved, Hanna, moved to New York wanted him to stay with her because she considered Cuba a stultifying environment for him. She wanted him to become a writer, but he went back to Cuba and went into the furniture business (This latter part of Sergio's life is humorously presented in family photo album style). Significantly, Hanna, the unattainable, ideal European woman, is very fair with fine, pale blonde hair. His wife Laura has coarse hair streaked with blonde. And the working class Elena is darker than he, presumably a comment on how class differences often match color differences in Cuba. Sergio's relations with women indicate his efforts to escape into sex and are an index of his class privilege and his refusal to act in a political way. In this regard, Elena, whom Sergio regards as a primitive, understands him more than he understands her. "You're not a revolutionary or a counterrevolutionary," she says. When he asks her what he is then, she answers, "Nada, tu eres nada--nothing, you're nothing."

As does Humberto Solas' film LUCIA, MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT goes beyond the official Cuban line that problems of sexual politics are solved when women

join the work force. As delineated in the narrative, the problem of sexual politics is seen to lie in Sergio's exploitative, condescending and elitist attitude toward women. Laura, the wife, is presented in furs at the airport as she is going to live in the United States. She leaves her wrist watch and wedding ring behind at Cuban customs. As she and her family pass through to the waiting area for their plane, Sergio watches them through the plate glass window, and the moment is like an epiphany as we see through Sergio's eyes what a strange breed these emigrants are and understand everything that is shallow about the Cuban bourgeoisie. We learn more about Laura as Sergio goes back to the apartment and rummages through her clothes, trying on some of them. (I found this visual presentation of Sergio's erotic life sensitive, witty and visually interesting, but could not help wondering if a Cuban audience was supposed to interpret a man putting on a woman's things as a sign of "decadent sexuality.") Sergio plays an old tape recording of a fight he once had with Laura. Her clothes, her voice on the recorder, have no more permanence in Sergio's life than she does, but they reveal how Sergio tried to shape her. His voice on the recording accuses, "I see you struggle between elegance and vulgarity. All these products keep you from being a slovenly Cuban girl." The same sound track is used again when Alea shows us the original fight, a sequence shown in the film after Sergio has seduced Elena, at which point the physical appearance and the class status of the two women stand clearly in contrast.

Alea exploits the character of Elena to present concepts of underdevelopment. She is standing on the street, presumably waiting for someone connected to the cinema industry, when Sergio persuades her to eat with him. He both gets her a screen test and criticizes her desire to be an actress. (The whole screen test sequence is quite funny, with cinematic tricks used to emphasize the artificiality and the foolishness of screen romance.) Sergio then offers Elena some of Laura's clothes, makes love to her, and has an extended affair with her. After he has grown tired of her, there is a series of sequences in which Elena's brother comes to demand Sergio marry her. Sergio was then willing to do so but backs down after being bullied. Finally the family fights with him and takes him to court, where they say he has taken advantage of a woman who is "mentally retarded." At this point one does not know what to make of Elena.

As in the rest of the film Alea's examination of false consciousness here is relentless. He does not hold Elena and her family up as idealized examples of the Cuban people, dignified or even right. Whereas Sergio is wrong to think of Elena as underdeveloped in the way he does, taking her to museums to improve her mind, Alea does not show Elena as having revolutionary goals. Indeed the whole wit of the sequences with Elena's family comes from the inappropriateness of their actions in a presumably revolutionary society. As they blackmail a man because their daughter is pregnant (and she may have been promiscuous), this family is acting out what would have been their best defense in that situation under capitalism, but they are doing so in a post-revolutionary milieu. The film satirizes the family's treating a female child as property, showing this as a reactionary way to behave. Elena is depicted as victimized both by Sergio and by her family, to which victimization she acquiesces.

Interestingly, in the novel from which the film was made, we have a more complex picture of Elena. We learn that she was the daughter of a laundress on a coffee

plantation in El Oriente, then, after the revolution, a teacher in the big campaign against illiteracy, then arrested for casual prostitution. Why Alea left these details out of the film I do not know but can only hazard the guess that to show a literacy teacher going into prostitution is taboo.

Another sequence involving Elena that differs significantly from novel to film is the sequence in Hemingway's Cuban home, now a museum. In this sequence, which is a mixture of documentary and narrative, Sergio takes Elena to Hemingway's old estate, which is still tended by the man who was Hemingway's servant, a Cuban who has completely absorbed his white master's ideals. As a further example of false consciousness, in the novel Desnoës has Russian tourists in the place photographing everything in sight and encouraging Elena to pose sexily by the animal trophies. Sergio becomes angry with the way the Russian tourists encourage Elena to act out the wild passionate Cuban woman role and at the way they take Cuba home as a trophy in the form of photographs without understanding Cuban cultural life at all. We can understand why these Russian tourists were not included in the film, especially since night clubs still operate in Havana with traditional style "sexy" shows for the sake of the Russian technicians based there.

In 1967, Desnoës said that he was planning a novel about a girl growing up in the years between the revolution and the missile crisis. Although he never completed such a work, certainly we can see that a character such as Elena was of interest to both Desnoës and Alea. She is a young woman of the people, not underdeveloped in the way Sergio thought, yet with not much interesting to do or be.

DOCUMENTARY SECTIONS

In terms of the plot line, the film traces Sergio's life after his wife and parents leave for the United States in 1961 through the missile crisis in 1962. The film moves back and forth through time, since Sergio turns frequently to his memories to try to understand what is happening to him. Because of the documentary footage, the revolution is always in the background. History intrudes into the narrative even though Sergio is shown as paralyzed and unable to act in history. The narrative ends at the time of the missile crisis, which reveals Sergio's paralysis even in the face of mobilization. Included in this part of the film is Fidel's own speech at that time in which he emphasized the historicity of each person's life and the importance of living out one's own historical role as well. Not only does Alea present Sergio's alienation but also a picture of an island country facing annihilation as a whole.

A long documentary section which comes in the middle of the film seems unrelated to Sergio's story but serves two important purposes. Footage shot at the trial of the counterrevolutionary officers captured at Playa Giron presents within the film MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT that which the protagonist has excluded from his life -- the revolution and a revolutionary mentality. In terms of cinematic style, this footage also reminds us that one of Cuba's greatest artistic achievements has been the development of a new documentary film style, which combines hand-held camera, location shooting--often in obscure country locations, and political analysis. Alea uses

documentary footage to comment on the narrative film style in a way that is reminiscent of early Godard. In *MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT* the contrast between the long documentary insert, seemingly unrelated to the narrative, and the narrative part of the film serves to reinforce the theme of Sergio's divorce from the political, yet the documentary footage also asserts the inescapable reality of that sphere.

In this middle documentary section, the various counterrevolutionary leaders who are being tried do not define themselves as murderers. They define themselves as types with one specific function in society -- the priest, the philosopher, the believer in free enterprise -- all with their niches thought out for themselves. What comes out during the trial of Calviño, the sadistic army officer known as the "butcher," is that by letting Calviño do all the torturing and by not thinking too much about it, the others could maintain their cohesively moral identity. The commentary states, "The truth of the group is in the murderer." Alea uses this sequence in the film to emphasize the consequences of a false consciousness among the bourgeoisie, especially as related to Sergio, who thinks he is truly separate from political action. As the commentary states, all bourgeois society has a division of moral labor and places an emphasis on individuality so that nobody has to assume total consciousness/conscience. The counterrevolutionaries do not recognize themselves as members of a system that entangles them in their own act. In this section, the film also significantly offers the image of the role of a revolutionary woman. We see a strong and angry woman denouncing Calviño at the trial, which is an image of woman which Sergio cannot conceive of.

CUBA AND THE INTELLECTUALS

Both the novel and the film were finished before 1971 and the First National Congress on Education and Culture when Castro waged an all out war on "cultural imperialism." At that time Castro said that artists and writers must reject "all manifestations of a decadent culture, the fruit of a society or societies that are rent by contradictions." (*GRANMA*, Engl. edn., 5/9/71) Early in the revolution, Castro had called for the development of a New Person to meet the exigencies of the new society. For ten years then the motto for intellectuals was, "Within the revolution, everything. Outside the revolution, nothing." But by 1968, after the film was made, newspapers published many open critiques of "decadent" art. Although *MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT* has not lost its place in Cuba as a peak of artistic achievement, both as a novel and as a film, neither Desnoës nor Alea have done any more works like this since then, that is, works which show an obvious European influence. After working with Alea on the screenplay, Desnoës proceeded to write the English translation of the novel, incorporating incidents from the film, and the translation was released in the United States in 1967. Latin intellectuals cannot, even after the revolution, declare themselves untouched by European and North American thought, for the very concept of underdevelopment, which exerts as powerful an influence in post-revolutionary Cuba as ever, means that the intellectual has been strongly shaped by foreign conceptual models. In both its theme and its style, the film *MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT* takes up the subject of underdevelopment and foreign influences and shows both the need to

put and the possibility of putting what has been gained from abroad at the service of the revolution.

However, the film does not show what should happen to an intellectual class after the revolution, and this is the film's weakest point politically. The New York critics saw in it the depiction of a sensitive intellectual and admired the way the film treated the intellectual's alienation within a changing, proletarian society. We see Sergio committed to himself, but the film does not say how an intellectual sympathetic and committed to revolution would implement that commitment in action. Desnoës, who goes back to Cuba and then returns to the United States, and Alea, who is sympathetic to the revolution but never joins the Communist Party, and even the actor Corrieri, who leaves acting to lead El Teatro Escambray in rural areas, all made momentous personal decisions in this regard. But the film never depicts these kinds of decision-making processes for intellectuals. Should the intellectual be retrained after the revolution, sent into the provinces to regain contact with the people (Mao's dictum) or sent to cut sugarcane? Or should intellectuals teach to pass on their skills? To whom? To the poor or to university students, who now consider themselves the teachers' peers. If intellectuals join the party, what does party discipline mean to them? Surely Desnoës and Alea have come to terms personally with the issue of party membership and discipline. Cubans do have models of revolutionary intellectuals for obviously Fidel and Che have come from the intellectual class.

If intellectuals in the United States find they can identify with this film, the question still remains. What should intellectuals do if they are sympathetic to socialism? How do they "join" the working class? According to some New York reviewers, that the film does not answer this question is one of its main strengths, saving the film from dogmatism. If as in Cuba, the audience already has a revolutionary mentality, the film stands as a critique of outmoded ways of thought. However, if in the United States we ask whom this film serves and how, we see from its critical reception that *MEMORIES OF UNDERDEVELOPMENT* has generally been appreciated as a picture of a sensitive person's existential alienation in contemporary Cuba. Within the context of a society accomplishing a revolution, the film serves a political end. In the United States, it can be coopted.

MEMORIES is distributed by the Center for Cuban Studies. Also acclaimed in Cuba and Europe, is Alea's film comedy, *DEATH OF A BUREAUCRAT*.